On Postorientalism and its Discontents

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Abstract—In this article, I call into question some of the concepts with which postcolonialism occupies itself. Central to its preoccupations are issues of representation and misrepresentation, among many others. In today's context where immigration, whether coercive or voluntary, often figures on front pages, breaking and main news alike, one ought to ponder over the way Muslims are misrepresented in the press, and the way journalism is couched in populist political discourse especially after the attacks on the World Trade Centre. The backlash on things Muslims in the West was so relentless that some politicians almost colluded with some journalists to paint Muslims with the typical colours of fundamentalism, justifying subsequent attacks Muslims fell prey to in the aftermath of 9/11.

Keywords—backlash, misrepresentation, postcolonialism, press, representation, immigration.

I. INTRODUCTION

Whilst colonialism may be re-storied as one chapter in our past history, imperialism, its forefather, still looms large on the horizon deciding on "the current rifts between black and white, Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and Western".[1] Dabashi explains that for propagandists, like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, the only difference between Asians and Muslims is that the former "have learned the game and may steal the show" while the latter "have lost the game and may spoil the show".[2] Guilty of xenophobia, these think-tank thinkers cultivate anti-Muslim sentiments by inviting around the table "the classic syndromes of purity and danger"[3] to police the borders against intruders. Fukuyama's Hegelian existentialist thoughts as regards the need for recognition

are the same that [mis]inform Huntington's urge to construct an enemy after the Cold War was over. These same attitudes find an echo in their predecessor, Lewis, who writes off Islam and writes of Europe as being "under constant threat from Islam".[4] What threatens him more than conquest is conversion to Islam and assimilation of its ways. These very antagonistic attitudes survive today in journalistic reports, as we shall see in due course.

II. IN CRITIQUE OF POSTCOLONIALISM

The East, the sworn enemy of civilisation, which referred ephemerally to the Soviet bloc in the era of the Cold War, has come to refer to none other but Muslims. Without presenting the evidence needed, Huntington replaces the then dying, if not obsolete, paradigm of the cold war with what he construes as a better, or perhaps worse, alternative, "a civilizational paradigm"[5] Fukuyama ascribes "the current revival of Islamic fundamentalism, touching virtually every country in the world…to the failure of Muslim societies generally to maintain their dignity vis-à-vis the non-Muslim West".[6]

As the abysmal chasm between East and West deepens and the divisions sharpen, East meets West only to part ways once more. Though insalubrious, the tensions marking out these relations will live on as long as differences are not tolerated. In fact, these tensions are more likely to be set ablaze if "an atmosphere in which a genuine dialogue can take place"[7] is not created. Huntington holds these differences, especially those pertaining to religion, to be basic, the motor behind "the most dangerous source of escalation that could lead to

[1]Youssef Yacoubi, "Edward Said, Eqbal Ahmad, and Salman Rushdie: Resisting the Ambivalence of Postcolonial Theory", p. 215. In Ferial J. Ghazoul, ed., *Edward SaidAnd Critical Decolonization.* Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

[2]Hamid Dabashi, *Postorientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, p. 237. USA and UK: Transaction Publishers, 2009.

[3]Frederic Jameson, "On Cultural Studies", p. 273. In John Rajchman, ed., *The Identity In Question*. Great Britain: Routledge, 1995.

[4]Bernard Lewis, *Islam and The West*, p. 13. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

[5]Jack F. Matlock, "Can Civilizations Clash?" p. 42. In George Ritzer and ZeynepAtalay, eds., *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*. Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010.

[6]Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, pp. 235-236. USA: Free Press, 1992.

[7]Tariq Ramadan, "Islam and Muslims in Europe: A Silent Revolution toward Rediscovery", p. 158. In Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners toCitizens.*New York:Oxford University Press, 2002.

global wars".[8] Matlock posits that an overemphasis on disparities overshadows the "cultural features that hold true across civilizations",[9] which only foreshadows bloodshed. Gray takes Huntington to task by bringing into the fore cases of what he calls "intra-civilizational conflicts"[10], including WWI and WWII, that do not fit into Huntington's distorting lenses. Numerically speaking, it is erroneous to assume and presume that every living soul in the Muslim world is Muslim just as it is a grave error to think that every Westerner is a Christian. To think solely within this slanted frame of religiosity would be tantamount to feeding and fueling religious conflicts and would only amount to bigotry and fanaticism, the very fanaticism of which Huntington is guilt-ridden.

What Huntington, Fukuyama and Lewis cannot bring themselves round to grasp is the need to draw a clear-cut distinction between the resurgence of Islam and the sporadic and spasmodic upsurge of violence the world witnesses now and then. In their haste to jump to foregone conclusions, Orientalists forget that there are as many Islams as there are interpretations. Even Islamists have often been inclined to underscore "what distinguishes Islam from the West, presenting it and its adherents, as the Other".[11] A Freudian reading of this incrimination reveals that "a group's past inevitably exposes not the glorious co-existence of diversity, but rather the skullduggery of the group's real conflicts that have been purposefully forgotten under the pressure of historical circumstance".[12] On being cornered, Muslims in the West retreated to Islam, a common denominator, to combat prejudicial and exclusionary attitudes. This being said, history abounds with cases bearing living testimonies to the ability of Muslims and non-Muslims to live side by side in peace and harmony. Saikal states that whilst coming of age, "Islam maintained its pristine respect for other revealed religions and interacted with them positively and dialectically".[13] This short-lived, though protracted, tug of war sullying, staining and stifling contemporary relations counts for very little compared with the much longer periods of peace that have always stood Muslims and Christians in good stead and still do. Hate-mongers would be dumbstruck to hear of cases where Muslims came to the rescue of Christians and where Christians reciprocated.

III. THE ORIENT WRITES BACK TO POWER

In his magnum opus, *Orientalism*, Said seems only to reconfirm and reiterate the monolithic view that sees that the West exists by virtue of its invention and imagining of a shorthand East as its "deepest and most recurring images of the Other".[14] The West, in Saidian parlance, acquired meaning by setting itself apart and "off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self",[15] one against which to measure one's superiority and on which to impose one's supremacy. For Mcleod, "colonialism created a way of seeing the world",[16] a classificatory grid according to which races were stratified, if not objectified. The West is in every case "the spectator, the judge and the jury, of every facet of Oriental behavior".[17] The East being imagined, judged and produced is not a place or a location but "a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics", having its origin "in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone's work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining",[18] or an amalgam, perhaps I should say, an avalanche of all the above.

The Orient that is made available for consumption in the West "is discursively created as an object of knowledge and this process of construction and categorization serves to reinforce the colonial project of

[8]Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" p. 28. In George Ritzer and ZeynepAtalay, eds., *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*. Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010.

[9]Jack F. Matlock, Jr, "Can Civilizations Clash?" p. 35. In George Ritzer and ZeynepAtalay, eds., *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*. Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010.

[10]John Gray, "Global Utopias and Clashing Civilizations: Misunderstanding the Present", p. 29. In George Ritzer and ZeynepAtalay, eds., *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*. Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010.

[11]Humayun Ansari, *Muslims in Britain*, p. 4.UK: Minority Rights Group International, 2002.

[12]Richard H. Armstrong, "Last Words: Said, Freud, and Traveling Theory", p. 135. In Ferial J. Ghazoul, ed., *Edward SaidAnd Critical Decolonization.* Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

[13]Amin Saikal, *Islam and the West: Conflict or Cooperation?*, p. 30. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Under the rule of the second caliph Omar or what came to be labeled as the Golden Age of Islam, a decree accorded both Christians and Jews alike full freedom of worship. The Abassaid dynasty honoured the word of Omar perpetuating a tradition of equality for all irrespective of one's religious background.

[14]Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 1. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

[15] Ibid. p. 3.

[16]John Mcleod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p. 21. UK: Manchester University Press, 2000.

[17]Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 109. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

[18] Ibid. p. 177.

conquest and subjugation".[19] Foucault believes "that power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations".[20] Knowledge, as Said prefers to see it, begets power, "and more power requires more knowledge and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control."[21] As the study of such power-based relationships shifts to the mass media, "the focus on modes of power and hegemony grows sharper".[22] In his blending of Foucauldian and Gramscian thoughts on hegemony, Said concludes that the relationship holding in thrall the West with the Rest is no more than "a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony".[23] The rules are then exclusively dictated by the "white, male, and upper class", and they only serve "to denigrate and dominate and legitimate the privilege and domination of the more powerful forces".[24] What feeds this power is the amount of systemic knowledge being produced. Bush is not surprised that cultural imperialism hinges largely "on the relationship between knowledge production and control and imperial power".[25] As a discursive practice, Orientalism is that "enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage - even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively".[26] The Orientalist enterprise is, as Al-Azm lays bare, "shot through and through with racist assumptions, barely camouflaged mercenary interests, reductionistic

explanations and anti-human prejudices"[27] that beg to be clinically diagnosed.

IV.   Media Voices between Ethics and Politics

Media representations of minority groups are for the most part said to be power-laden and lopsided in their coverage. This partiality and lopsidedness was heavily felt right after the attacks on the World Trade Centre. Thus, "Muslims and Arabs have endured increased incidences of discrimination against members of their communities, both by private actors and by the state", according to Muyinda.[28] No wonder then that the editorial line of quite a few well-established papers has changed accordingly in concord with the discourse of some prominent politicians. Muslims came under the spotlight the moment their presumed guilt was declared. What had been an "undefended border was becoming a security barrier".[29] This securitisation process is part of "a politically and socially constructed process by which governments and the media present threats to national or state security in a highly dramatized and persuasive form of public discourse".[30] No sooner had the masterminds of 9/11 claimed full responsibility for the attacks on the World Trade Center than the then Premier of Ontario, Mike Harris, announced the formation of a special police unit designed to track down and deport illegal immigrants,[31] leaving no shade of doubt as to who should be scapegoated and expatriated.

Racialising the Other as hellish, fiendish and devilish is sure to undermine rather than reinforce "national security while also heightening the vulnerability and exclusion of Arabs, Muslims".[32] In keeping with the derogatory political discourse, some voices overreacted, as most media did, to 9/11 in an emotionally-charged and

[19]Jane Hiddleston, *Understanding Postcolonialism*, p.77. UK: Acumen, 2009.

[20]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, p. 27. Trans.Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

[21]Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 36. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

[22]Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 61. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

[23]Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 5. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

[24]Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern*, p. 61. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

[25]Barbara Bush, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*, p. 124.Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2006.

[26]Rubén Chuaqui, "Notes on Edward Said's View of Michel Foucault", p. 99. In Ferial J. Ghazoul, ed., *Edward SaidAnd Critical Decolonization.* Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2007.

[27]Sadik Jalal Al-Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse", p. 55. In George Ritzer and ZeynepAtalay, *eds., Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*. Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010.

[28]Estella Muyinda, ed., *Racial Discrimination in Canada*, p. 9.Toronto: National Anti-Racism Council of Canada, 2007.

[29]Howard Adelman, "Canadian Borders and Immigration Post 9/11", p. 5.Retrieved from:
http://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/9730/AdelmanCanadian.borders.911.pdf?sequence=1

[30]Christopher Murphy, ""Securitizing" Canadian Policing: A New Policing Paradigm For the Post 9/11 Security State?", p. 3. Retrieved from httpwww.metropolis.netpdfsCMurphy%20security%20polcing%20article.pdf

[31]ReemBahdi, "No Exit: Racial Profiling and Canada's War Against Terrorism", p. 295. Osgoode Hall Law Journal : Vol. 41, Nos. 2 & 3, 2003.

[32] Ibid. p. 293.

irrationally-loaded way "with persistent calls for the use of military force to bring about justice".[33] As a matter of fact, "after September 11 the lens has been brought too close, resulting in new forms of distortion, sensationalism and, at times, burning sensations produced by concentrated rays of majority-culture disapproval".[34] Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslims are good neighbours, there is a minority of Muslims who are busy doing all it takes to attract the wrong kind of attention, besmearing and tarnishing the image others work so hard on polishing. It is not for no reason that Muslims came to be misrepresented as the sworn enemies of Western civilisation with all the freedoms it strives to warrant, thus accentuating the Manichean allegory, the polarisation between the US and the Rest, us and/vs. them.

Canada was perceived as America's soul-mate so that what threatened the US was an immediate threat to Canadians as well. "Other than the outpouring of sympathy for Americans", border crossing became a nightmare for Muslims and was "most acutely felt at the long delays at border points for both people and goods".[35]Little were the media wary that with the absence of an open enemy to wage war against, they were cultivating hatred which would soon translate into sporadic and spasmodic violence misdirected at innocent Canadians doomed for the only reason that they were deemed suspect/Muslim.

The media fostered an atmosphere of fear and distrust with the repetitive "dissemination of anti-Muslim imagery".[36] "The blend of the xenophobic fears of the "other", and that of terrorism"[37] blinded and

manipulated media consumers so deeply they framed Islam as a faith where heinous and hideous atrocities were licensed, a religion to which horrendous acts of terror were endemic. It has been noticed that victims of hate crime prefer not to go public about their cases for "fear of retribution, lack of surveillance, and victims' apprehension of the criminal justice system",[38] which somehow accounts for why these crimes have remained underreported. According to the Canadian Islamic Congress, anti-Muslim hate crimes following 9/11 were on the increase.[39] This is hardly surprising given the turn the editorial line of Canadian media took, including widely read papers such as the *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail* and even magazines such as *Maclean* whose only frontline was the legitimacy of the frontal war on terror and the threat immigration posed.

The discourse on immigration pitched up its tone from all-welcoming to inhospitable being thus punctuated by mania and phobia "of the alien, the fanatical other, the Muslim newcomer who was unaccustomed to the freedoms and tolerance of Western civilization".[40] Miscalculated press releases slandered bearded men and veiled women, causing many to shave their beard, others to unveil themselves and even change their neighbourhood to flee racial slurs and prejudice. Bearded men from other ethnic groups had to experience some of this pain because, to these belligerent and bellicose chauvinists, a beard, veil or even a name were

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[33]T. Y. Ismael and J. Measor, "Racism and the North American Media Following 11 September: The Canadian Setting", p. 110. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *25*, 1/2 Winter/Spring, 2003.Retrieved fromhttp://caoshea.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/racism-and-the-north-american-media-following-11-sept-canada.pdf

[34]MeenaSharify-Funk, "Representing Canadian Muslims: Media, Muslim Advocacy Organizations, and Gender in the Ontario Shari'ah Debate", p. 75.Canada: Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2009.

[35]Howard Adelman, "Canadian Borders and Immigration Post 9/11", p. 5.Retrieved from: http://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/9730/AdelmanCanadian.borders.911.pdf?sequence=1

[36]Barbara Perry and Brian Levin, *Hate Crimes*, p. 91. USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009.

[37]T. Y. Ismael and J. Measor, "Racism and the North American Media Following 11 September: The Canadian Setting", p. 124. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *25*, 1/2 Winter/Spring, 2003.Retrieved fromhttp://caoshea.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/racism-

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[37] Barbara Perry, "Inspiring Islamophobia: Media and State targeting of Muslims in Canada since 9/11". TASA Conference 2006, University of Western Australia & Murdoch University, 4-7 December 2006. Retrieved fromhttp://www.tasa.org.au/conferences/conferencepapers06/papers/Indigenous%20issues,race,%20ethnicity%20and%20migration/Perry,Poynting.pdf.

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[39]Canadian Islamic Congress (2003). Islamic Congress Finds Most Police Departments Have Incomplete Data on Rising Tide of Hate-motivated Crimes. Retrieved from www.canadianislamiccongress.com/mc/media_communique.php?id=305

[40]T. Y. Ismael and J. Measor, "Racism and the North American Media Following 11 September: The Canadian Setting", p. 116. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, *25*, 1/2 Winter/Spring, 2003.Retrieved fromhttp://caoshea.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/racism-and-the-north-american-media-following-11-sept-canada.pdf

enough evidence of the criminal tendencies of those who wore or bore it. In chewing the cud politicians sold to win the mob, media reports revisited and revived *Reel Bad Arabs*, reproducing an oft-heard-of, but never heard from, breed of Muslims on display in Hollywood. Such a portrayal gave way to individuals to unleash their anger and to the State to indulge "in furthering more stern and restrictive security policies" vis-à-vis non-Westerners.[41]

Consumed with fear of the unknown, the state responded by lapsing into violence, thus setting an example for the mass to emulate. The state adopted a series of measures to reinforce its homeland security, insinuating that our enemies live next-door. The anti-terrorism act empowered the government "to intrude on the lives of Canadians",[42] especially Arabs/Muslims upon suspicion of their intentions in order to prevent what was thought to be coming. The interpretation of this law, which ironically held suspects to be guilty until proven innocent, was so vague and loose it bedeviled a large section of the Canadian population without there being any way to prove it. Under the provisions of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, suffice it to throw allegations at anyone *"*to identify suspected terrorists without the higher evidentiary standards required under criminal law",[43] in a reminder of the Salem village witch-hunt trials. In an encroachment on the right to freedom, suspects were kept under surveillance and even in custody, if need be, for as long as it took the police to interrogate them. Potential terrorists, if this means anything, run the risk of being kept in captivity as long as a capricious policeman would judge necessary and could be deported if that same policeman deems it right.

V.   CONCLUSION

A decade later, one would have expected the waveshock to have subsided and receded, but because politicians and journalists connive to reiterate fallacies, they still rake up the ashes in the hope of setting ablaze the dead fire and gearing public opinion towards vilifying Islam and profiling Muslims. As late as 2011, in commemoration of the tragic events of 11 September, the then Canadian Prime Minister Harper still maintained that "the major threat is still Islamism",[44] revealing how ill-informed he is

about a religion he damns and condemns readily by clinging on to the myth that Islam was and still is a religion of the sword. Yet, one has to acknowledge that quite a few individuals, having hijacked the Islamic faith, had given the Prime Minister the ammunition he needed to fire amok and the press to make a case.

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[43] Ibid.
[44]http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/harper-says-islamicism-biggest-threat-to-canada-1.1048280. For more

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on this interview, log on to
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